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ABSTRACT

A cross-national analysis reveals that women's status in contemporary society must be considered as a multidimensional phenomenon and that no one isolated factor best explains women's overall position. Using data from "The Handbook of International Data on Women" (Boulding and others, 1976), and from United Nations documents, a model to reflect women's position in the political, economic, educational, and family spheres was constructed. Independent variables included each nation's population size, annual rate of population increase, per capita gross national product (GNP), annual growth of GNP per capita, level of modernity and economic development, and degree of governmental coerciveness. Results indicate that women's status is best viewed as two-dimensional. One dimension is composed of women's political, educational, and family status, which are highly and positively intercorrelated. The second dimension is women's position in the economic sphere, which is independent of status in any of the other spheres. Rapid population growth is related to low status for women in the political sphere. High levels of economic status for women are related to high levels of economic development. Women's educational position may be predicted by a nation's level of development and modernity. Generally, a high annual rate of population increase is negatively related to women's social status. (KC)

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A PRELIMINARY MODEL OF WOMEN'S STATUS IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETIES

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ABSTRACT

A major deficiency in past works on women's position has been the tendency to treat women's status in contemporary societies as an unvarying, unitary construct. This paper attempts to overcome this problem through a cross-national analysis of women's status. Statistical analyses are employed to develop a model of status and to identify those factors that best explain and predict women's position. The results of these analyses indicate that women's status is best viewed as a multidimensional phenomenon and that no one isolated factor best explains women's "overall" position in contemporary nations.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The rebirth of the women's movement in the United States in the late 1960's, and the quest by women for equal rights in many parts of the world, has sparked an interest among academics in the nature and determinants of sexual stratification. Within the last decade, in particular, anthropologists representing almost all theoretical orientations have produced a new and rapidly expanding literature concerning sexual inequality and the determinants of women's status.

Many of these studies, however, can be characterized as having two major flaws. The first is the tendency to focus on the conditions perpetuating the low status of women (Quinn 1977:181). Such explanations which focus on low status treat status as an unvarying phenomenon and make it difficult to formulate ideas concerning the determinants of women's position since, in effect, the dependent variable is assumed to have no variance. This tendency to identify women's status as universally low is, thus, largely responsible for the abundance of unicausal explanations of women's position permeating the literature today (Quinn 1977:182). This view of women's position may also have serious consequences since it fails to credit women with a wide range of accomplishments and perpetuates myths concerning women's biological, social, and cultural inferiority.

Moreover, recent investigations of women's roles in specific ethnographic contexts have uncovered a wide range of evidence suggesting that women's position varies considerably. This has led several authors (see, for example, Quinn 1977, Whyte 1978) to suggest that rather than searching for unicausal

explanations of women's low status, it is more appropriate to address the question of variation and of the complex nature of women's position, and, therefore, more useful to treat women's position as a composite of many different variables.

Whyte (1978) has shown the need for this approach conclusively in his recent cross-cultural study in which he focused on status as the complex outcome of a large number of variables in pre-industrial societies. In this work, Whyte identified nine scales of status, each representing a different aspect of the position of women. Further, these nine scales were found to vary independently. While other recent works (Sacks 1974, Sanday 1974) have also focused on status as the complex outcome of two or more independent variables, Whyte is the first to develop the implications of this approach for cross-cultural research. The implications of these results for cross-national studies, as well as for women's lives in contemporary nations, need to be developed.

The second problem plaguing the literature on women's position stems from the fact that there is no agreed upon definition of status. This is partly responsible for the wide disagreement in the literature concerning the effects on women of such factors as modernization or industrialization (see Bossen 1978 and Collins 1971 for examples of these contrasting ideas) since these factors may have different effects depending upon which aspect of women's lives is actually being considered. While this lack of an agreed upon definition may be due, in part, to the purpose each investigator has in investigating status, this lack of agreement often results in status being defined inconsistently, and sometimes not being defined explicitly at all.

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When status is defined ambiguously or not defined explicitly, it becomes unclear whether a researcher is considering women's overall position or their position in one particular sphere of life. In many cases, it is merely assumed that the reader knows what is meant by the term the "status of women".

However, as early as 1920, Lowie questioned the very existence of the general phenomenon of status and suggested that

> the treatment of woman is one thing, her legal status another, her opportunities for public activity still another, while the character and extent of her labors belong again to another distinct category (1920:187).

In line with Lowie, Quinn has suggested that it may be more useful in future investigations of women's position to treat status as a complex, multidimensional phenomenon (Quinn 1977:183). Going one step further, Whyte has demonstrated the necessity of examining the empirical relationships which may exist among the different aspects of women's position (1978:95-120).

It is clear, then, that to go beyond the simplistic and unsatisfactory conceptualizations of status that have been suggested, and to clarify many discrepancies in the literature on the determinants of women's status in contemporary societies, several steps must be taken. First, it is necessary to move away from the tendency to treat women's position as a simple phenomenon by developing a model of status that incorporates a number of variables, and thereby preserves the complex, multidimensional nature of status which more closely approximates the reality of women's lives in contemporary nations. Second, the idea of women's status must be clearly defined and operationalized in such a way that status has an empirical or quantitative reality. Consequently, this paper presents a preliminary

multivariate analysis of women's status in contemporary nations which accomodates these needs.

1. METHODS AND MATERIALS

A rich resource for the development of such an analysis is the aggregate data collected under the auspices of the United Nations and presented in the Handbook of International Data on Women (Boulding, Nuss, Carson, and Greenstein 1976). Much of the data in the Handbook deals with women's roles in the economic and educational spheres and with women's reproductive lives. To augment these data, information was obtained from other United Nations documents concerning women's activites in other realms of life, particularly the political realm (see UN document A/Conf.94/25, 1979). Information concerning characterisitics of contemporary nations, such as level of economic development, level of modernity, and degree of governmental coerciveness, was culled from Graham and Gurr's (1969) The History of Violence in America: Historical and Comparative Perspectives (see these sources for a complete description of the variables used in this study). From these sources, a multivariate data set was constructed which consists of information on 122 variables and which includes 159 contemporary nations. There are, of course, several limitations to the use of such aggregate data. For instance, variation in women's position within a nation will be obscured as will be women's activites which fall outside the realm of official enumeration (see Mascia-Lees 1983 for a more complete discussion of these problems). At the

same time, a cross-national data set is invaluable for testing a wide range of theoretical propositions which have import for the study of women's status determinants in contemporary societies.

To fulfill the need outlined earlier of developing a more sophisticated concept of women's status, four indices of status were constructed which reflect women's position in the political, economic, educational, and family spheres of life (the IWPS, IWES, IWEDS, and IWFS respecitvely). Variables were chosen for inclusion in each index based on availability of data, and on an assessment of factors which seem to influence most critically women's position in that sphere. These indices are presented in Table 1 in generalized form.

Each index was constructed in a standardized manner to increase its comparability and to facilitate its usefulness and comprehension. This standardized format consists of three basic steps. In the first step, each variable used in the index is standardized to a zero to one range. This is done so that every variable within the index is on a similar scale and is comparable to every other variable. The scaling procedure used is:

$$x - x_{min}/x_{max} - x_{min}$$

where x is the variable, x_{min} is the minumum observed value of x, and x_{max} is the maximum observed value of x. This scales all observed values between zero and unity.

In the second step, each variable is weighted according to its suggested contribution to the entire index. Finally, the entire index is again scaled

between zero and one so that every index is comparable to every other index. The scaling procedure used here is:

$$I - I_{min}/I_{max} - I_{min}$$

where I is the value of the Index, I_{min} is the observed minimum value of the Index, and I_{max} is the observed maximum value of the Index.

In general, each index was constructed by choosing different coefficients to weight each variable in the index. This weighting reflects the presumed relative contribution of each variable to women's overall status in the sphere in question. It should be noted that these indices are a preliminary conceptual model which may be subject to revisions as others are able to contribute to their refinement (see Mascia-Lees 1983 for a complete description of the development of these indices).

The construction of these indices moves toward overcoming some of the most critical deficiencies in the theoretical treatment of women's status. First, it allows the idea of the status of women to be defined clearly and operationalized in such a way that status becomes a measureable concept. Second, by constructing each index, taking into consideration a number of factors, women's position in each sphere of life is treated as a composite of many different variables. Lastly, by constructing several indices which are components of status, the complex, multidimensional nature of status can be assessed, and the relations among dimensions can be determined.

Using these indices of status, it is possible to assess the relationship of each index of status with every other index using correlational analysis

(program BMDP8D, 1977 revised version, Dixon and Brown 1979). In doing so, it is possible to assess the validity of treating women's overall status as either a simple, unitary construct or as a complex phenomenon.

To have practical import, any study of women's status in contemporary societies must also take into consideration those factors which contribute to improving women's position. However, as Berch pointed out, many solutions have been proposed to improve women's position, only to have been found unsatisfactory or unsuccessful (1982:182).

This failure may be due, in part, to the simplistic way in which theorists and program planners alike have often conceptualized women's status. For instance, it is not uncommon for one isolated factor, such as birth control or modernization, to be proposed as a cure-all for women's status ills. However, it may be argued that women's lives in any nation are affected by a wide range of factors which must be considered simultaneously. It seems clear, then, that if efforts at improving women's position are to have their proposed impact, it is necessary to identify not only which factors contribute to high status for women, but to uncover whether different variables are important in explaining women's position in each of the separate spheres of social life. To move in this direction, a first step is to identify those variables that have the most value explaining and predicting women's position in the four status spheres named earlier. To accomplish this, multiple linear regression is used in this analysis of women's position (program BMDP2R, 1977 revised version, Dixon and Brown 1979). This multivariate statistical technique relates a dependent or target variable, in this case women's status in each separate sphere of life, to several independent or predictor variables. The

independent variables which have frequently been suggested to affect women's position and which are used in this study are listed in Table 2.

3. INTERPRETATION OF RESULTS

The results of the correlational analysis indicate that women's overall status can not be treated merely as a linear combination of the indices of women's status in the political, economic, educational, and family spheres of life. Instead, women's overall status is best viewed as a two dimensional phenomenon. One dimension is composed of women's political, educational, and family status. This conception is based on the intercorrelations which exist among these three aspects of status. The indices of women's political, educational, and family status are highly and positively intercorrelated (see Table 3).

The second dimension of status is women's position in the economic sphere. Women's status in this realm is independent of their status in any of the other three realms of life. This lack of association is somewhat surprising given the emphasis in previous work on the importance of the economic sphere of life to women's position in any of the other spheres. This is not to suggest that there is no relationship between women's economic behavior and their status in the political, educational, and family spheres. On the contrary, certain aspects of women's economic life may be clearly related to certain aspects of their life in these other areas. What this lack of intercorrelation between the Index of Women's Economic Status and the other three status indices does imply is that when women's overall economic status

is considered, rather than just individual aspects of women's economic behavior, there is no relationship with status in the other realms. It can be concluded from this that there is no significant relationship between the general status of women and the amount women contribute to the economy of a nation. Interestingly, this is consistent with Whyte's (1978) findings from pre-industrial societies that there is no association between women's status and the amount that they contribute to the subsistence base of their group.

The results of the regression analysis of women's status in the political sphere indicates that a combination of two independent variables is the most efficient predictor of this target variable (see Table 4). These include, in order of importance, annual rate of population increase and degree of governmental coerciveness. However, rate of population increase has a negative contribution while degree of coerciveness has a positive contribution. This suggests that rapid population growth is related to low status for women in the political sphere while high levels of governmental coerciveness are related to high levels of political status. This latter finding may be due to the tendency of many communist bloc countries, which are considered highly coercive on the scale used here, to grant women more equality under the law than many other types of political systems (Newland 1979:14-15).

Several variables contribute to the regression equation for predicting women's economic status. However, the only variable which has a positive contribution is level of economic development, which is primarily a measure of a nation's level of industrialization (See Graham and Gurr 1969:630-631). Thus, as might be expected, high levels of economic status for women are

related to high levels of economic development. By contrast, level of modernity, which may be considered a measure of standard of living since it takes into account aspects of life such as caloric intake, number of telephones, number of physicians etc., is negatively related to the Index of Women's Economic Status. This is somewhat surprising since the concept of modernity has often implied that a wider range of options will be open to individuals regardless of categorical membership such as sex or age. This lack of association between high modernity and high economic status for women may be partly explained by findings presented elsewhere (see Mascia-Lees 1983:53-55) that many communist bloc countries often afford women more equal participation with men in the economic realm in terms of overall participation rates, and yet such countries may not be high on a modernity scale. Thus, there may be a curvilinear relationship between level of modernity and women's economic status. However, this conclusion is in need of further empirical testing. What is interesting to note here is that while governmental coerciveness contributes positively in predicting women's political status, it has a negative contribution in relationship to women's economic position. This underscores the independence of the economic and political realms and suggests again the value and necessity of treating women's status separately in the different spheres of life rather than as an integrated, overall phenomenon.

Two other variables are negatively related to the Index of Women's Economic Status. These are annual population growth rate and annual growth rate of the GNP per capita. On the one hand, this suggests that developing nations which are experiencing rapid economic growth and which are

characterized by high birth rates will have lower economic status for women. On the other hand, it may be claimed that in those nations in which women's labor force participation is high, their fertility may be decreased. Thus, there is a question of causal ordering in this relationship between women's economic status and rate of population increase which needs further attention.

The combination of variables which is most efficient for predicting women's educational status is level of economic development and level of modernity. However, a nation's level of economic development is nearly twice as important as level of modernity in predicting women's educational position.

Finally, women's family status can also be predicted by a number of variables. Most important is the level of modernity followed by gross national product per capita, annual growth rate of GNP, and annual rate of population increase. Here high levels of modernity and GNP growth rate have a positive impact on women's family status while absolute level of GNP and annual rate of population increase have a negative influence for predicting women's family index status score. This negative relationship between rate of population increase and women's family status should not be surprising given the use of the child/woman ratio (a measure of fertility) in the construction of the Index of Women's Family Status.

The only general statement that can be made about the relationship of the various independent variables to women's status is that a high annual rate of population increase tends to be negatively related to women's position. Other factors, such as level of governmental coerciveness, level of modernity, or annual growth rate of a nation's gross national product may be positively related to women's status in one sphere while negatively related in another.

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1. DISCUSSION

The results of this study indicate that women's overall status can not be treated merely as a linear combination of the indices of women's status in the political, economic, educational, and family spheres of life. Instead, women's overall status must now be viewed as at least a two dimensional phenomenon. One dimension is composed of women's political, educational, and family status, and the other is composed of women's economic status. This conception of women's status is presented in Figure 1 and represents a preliminary model of women's status in contemporary societies.

It is now clear that it is no longer sufficient to treat the status of women in contemporary nations as a simple, unitary concept. Actually, there is a complex set of interrelationships among the variables used in the construction of each of the status indices, and an intriguing pattern of relationships among the overall four status indices as well. The intercorrelations among the indices of women's status in the political, educational, and family spheres suggest that changes in women's position in any one of these spheres may affect women's position in the other two as well. In light of this, any programs or policies which are developed to improve women's position in any of these areas must take these relationships into account if such programs and policies are to have their intended impact.

In considering those factors which contribute to explaining and predicting women's position it was found that different variables, or sets of variables, are important in explaining and predicting women's position in the separate spheres of life. This emphasizes again the need to treat women's status as a

complex phenomenon if a clearer understanding of the determinants of women's position is to be developed.

Once status is defined and operationalized in a clear and measureable manner, it becomes evident that women's position in contemporary nations is the complex outcome of many variables. Further, it is also evident that it is no longer sufficient merely to assert the interrelationship among different aspects of women's position, since the results found here indicate that the different aspects of women's status interact in a way which might not have been detected without the use of objective analytical techniques. All these findings exemplify the shortcomings of treating status as a simple, unitary idea as well as the shortcomings in proposing unicausal explanations of women's status.

Finally, it should be noted that while the results of this study may be in need of verification using a larger sample of nations, they already confirm several of the conclusions reached by Whyte (1978) in his study of women's status in pre-industrial societies. First, for example, Whyte's analysis suggests that there is a need to specify which aspect of the postion of women relative to men is being discussed when making comparisons across cultures (1978:174). This is an equally appropriate caution in investigations of women's position in contemporary nations, since the results of this study have pointed to the necessity of clearly identifying which aspect of women's position is being discussed rather than merely treating status as an integrated, unitary concept.

Similarly, Whyte has shown that there is no overall phenomenon that can be termed the status of women in pre-industrial societies (1978:174). This is

consistent with the findings of the present study that women's status in contemporary nations is a complex phenomenon composed of at least two dimensions which vary independently.

In line with Whyte (1978:175) it has also been found here that there is no one factor which can be claimed to lead to improvement in women's position in contemporary societies. This suggests that there is an evolutionary continuity between the idea of the status of women in pre-industrial societies and the status of women in contemporary societies which may have some significance in terms of equality between the sexes. The concept of status as a complex phenomenon which can be derived from both Whyte's study of women's position in pre-industrial societies and this study of women's position in contemporary nations suggests that

> there is no key barrier to the equality of women such that, if it falls, all other barriers will fall as well...Each existing form of inequality between the sexes must be attacked separately, using different tactics, and some may prove much harder to overcome than others. Yet the evolutionary tendencies present in modern industrial societies seem to present favorable opportunites for at least certain kinds of increasing equality between the sexes. Whether total equality in any real sense is possible remains uncertain, but we can expect women to continue to regain some of the ground they lost relative to men when humans first abandoned a simple hunting and gathering way of life thousands of years ago (Whyte 1978:183-184).

The evolutionary continuity which exists in women's status provides an opportunity for an optimistic outlook for improving women's position today. However, despite the continuity in the theoretical aspects of studying women's status in both pre-industrial and contemporary societies, it can be claimed that women still lag considerably behind men in many areas of social life. Thus, while favorable conditions for sexual equality may be present in some

form in contemporary societies, it is clear that the need of women to live comparably prestigious and satisfactory lives goes largely unmet around the world. This exemplifies the need for the continued investigation of the determinants of sexual stratification which may eventually lead to positive and concrete changes which actually move in the direction of improving women's position in many areas of life and in many areas of the world.

Table 1: The Indices of Status*

$$IWPS = \left[-1(a) + 3(b) + 6(c) + 0.025(d) + 0.025(e)\right] - j/k$$

where a is voting type, b is percentage of local government posts held by women, c is percentage of national government posts held by women, d is the number of international non-governmental women's organizations, e is the number of commissions established to promote equality in the political sphere, j is the minimum observed value of the IWPS, and k is the maximum observed value of the IWPS.

$$IWES = \left[a+2(b) + 2((c+d) + (e+f+g)) + 1/8(h+i)\right] - j/k$$

where a is the crude labor force rate for females, b is the index of femaleness for economic activity, c is the distribution index for females in professional and technical work, d is the distribution index for females in administrative and managerial work, e is the distribution index of females in clerical work, f is the distribution index of females in sales work, g is the distribution index of females in service work, h is the number of national commissions established to promote equality in economics, i is the number of national commissions which exist to promote equality in employment, j is the minimum observed value of the IWES, and k is the maximum observed value of the IWES.

$$IWEDS = \left[-1/2(a+b) + c + 2(d) + 4(e)\right] - j/k$$

where a is the index of femaleness for illiteracy, b is the index of female illiteracy, c is the student enrollment ratio at the first level of education, d is the student enrollment ratio at the second level of education, e is the index of femaleness in the third level of education, j is the minimum observed value of the IWEDS, and k is the maximum observed value of the IWEDS.

$$IWFS = \left[a - 2(b+c)\right] - j/k$$

where a is the minimum legal age for marriage for females, b is the distribution index of females in divorce, c is the child/woman ratio, j is the minimum observed value of the IWFS, and k is the maximum observed value of the IWFS.

*all letters represent values already scaled according to the procedure outlined above. For example, $a = a - a_{min} / a_{max} - a_{min}$

Table 2

INDEPENDENT VARIABLES USED IN REGRESSION ANALYSES

- Population Size
- Annual Rate of Population Increase
- Per Cent of Population in Centers over 20,000
- Per Capita Gross National Product (GNP)
- Annual Growth Rate of GNP Per Capita
- Level of Modernity
- Level of Economic Development
- Degree of Governmental Coerciveness

Table 3

PRODUCT-MOMENT CORRELATION COEFFICIENTS
BETWEEN INDICES OF WOMEN'S STATUS

	IWPS	IWES	IWEDS
IWES	0.0169 N=22		
IWEDS	0.6183* N=13	0.2011 N=21	
IWPS	0.6583* N=12	0.0453 N=18	0.7386* N=19

*P ≤ 0.05

Table 4

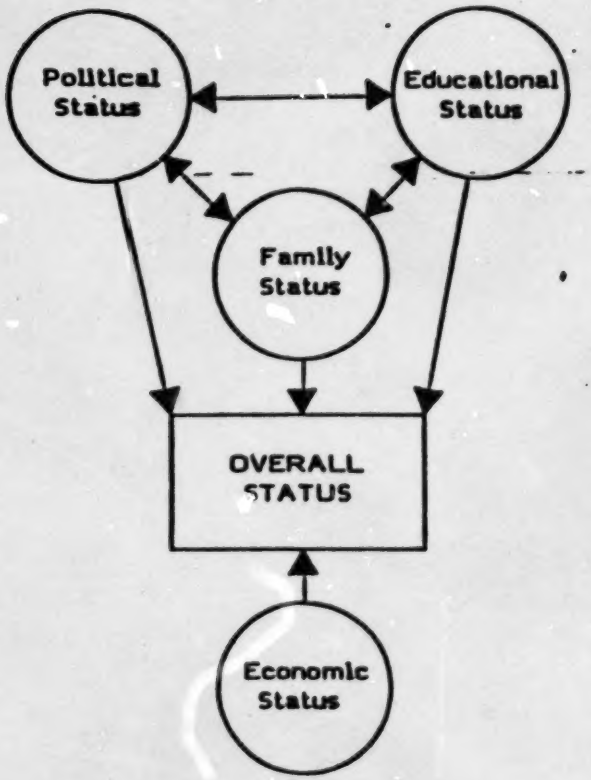
MULTIPLE REGRESSION ANALYSIS OF THE STATUS INDICES

Status Index	Independent Variable	Standardized Regression Coefficient	Contributions to R^2	t	df
IWPS	Population Increase	-0.602	0.1803	2.93**	18
	Coerciveness	0.456	0.1762	2.22*	
			R^2=0.3565		
IWES	Eco. Development	0.657	0.1158	3.71***	29
	Modernity	-1.061	0.2996	5.48***	
	Population Increase	-0.484	0.0395	2.60*	
	Coerciveness	-0.033	0.0395	1.60ns	
	GNP Growth	-0.154	0.0190	0.14ns	
			R^2=0.5725		
IWEDS	Eco. Development	0.330	0.6149	4.97***	28
	Modernity	0.611	0.0789	2.69*	
			R^2=0.6938		
IWFS	Modernity	1.058	0.0145	5.07***	12
	GNP	-0.430	0.0343	1.95ns	
	GNP Growth	0.439	0.0247	3.84**	
	Population Increase	-0.216	0.0153	1.57ns	
			R^2=0.0888		

***P ≤ 0.001
**P ≤ 0.01
*P ≤ 0.05
ns = not significant

Figure 1

A MODEL OF WOMEN'S STATUS



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